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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

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Statement

Introduction to Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation was founded in 1966 by a Buddhist nun, the venerable Master Cheng Yen, on the poor rural eastern coast of Taiwan Province of China. Although she led a simple and austere monastic life, Master Cheng Yen still saw how the poor in her neighbourhood suffered from lack of food, medicine and shelter. She encouraged each of her supporters, initially housewives of minimal means, to save US$ 0.02 a day to help those in need. She teaches that we can help others even if we ourselves are poor — that giving is the privilege not of the rich or those of a certain gender, but of the sincere. Today, the majority of Tzu Chi volunteers are women from all walks of life.

The organization's name, "Tzu Chi", embodies its ideal: "Tzu" means "compassion" and "Chi" means "relief". Members of Tzu Chi Foundation strive to help the poor and educate the rich, while practising "great kindness even to strangers; great compassion as though we share the same body". Tzu Chi volunteers strive to see strangers, or even their enemies, as fundamentally deserving of a happiness, love and peace equal to their own.

Relying on the concept of equality as the basis of great love — irrespective of personal relationships, gender, religion, race, nationality or other affiliations — the approach of Tzu Chi echoes the mission of UN-Women in advocating for human rights, gender equality and women's economic security, and elimination of violence against women and poverty. The mission of Tzu Chi encompasses four main areas: charity, medicine, education and humanistic culture, as well as the cross-cutting areas of disaster relief, bone-marrow donation, environmental protection and community volunteerism. Tzu Chi has expanded its work to include over 40 countries around the world, largely through initiatives of local, mostly female, volunteers and, as of 2011, it has carried out international relief missions in over 70 countries. The development of Tzu Chi is a testament to the spirit of great love, which transcends gender, religion, race, nationality and other affiliations.

Mission of charity: Zulu women in South Africa

The mission of Tzu Chi in South Africa which includes three programmes — skills training centres, the Blue Bank sewing skills project and the lunch programme for orphans (agriculture and sustainability) — serves as an example of the work of Tzu Chi in a particular country, and also provides a focus for themes to be considered by the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session: gender equality, education in training, security, women's economic rights through strengthening women's entrepreneurship, access to markets, ownership, leadership and reduction in domestic violence.

Tzu Chi first carried out its charity work in South Africa in 1992. Because of apartheid, Tzu Chi was able reach black populations of the country only after 1994. Of the nine native tribes in South Africa which are matriarchal, the Zulu community is the largest. Although blacks in the country are generally poor, Zulu women exhibit dexterity in crafting beautiful objects, threading beads and weaving. One component of the charity goals of Tzu Chi in South Africa has been to help eradicate hunger and poverty through improving living standards, promoting social

participation and strengthening skills so as to foster greater sustainability and security.

Tzu Chi has been establishing skills training centres across Durban since 1995; today, there are 524 skills training centres within different Zulu communities in Durban. Each Zulu woman is responsible for providing for her family; and the fact that she is able to work at centres located within her own community can help to improve social cohesion and prevent domestic violence. In each community, Zulu women with experience and skills were identified and encouraged to be teachers and leaders at each centre. Throughout the training process, leadership and operational sessions were held to help each leader acquire the skills needed to manage her centre independently. Because each Zulu community has teachers with different skills, each skills training centre makes and sells products unique to each community.

Tzu Chi volunteers have the same strong commitment possessed by members of UN-Women, a commitment based on the belief that every human has the right to realize her potential so as to benefit others. Thus, Tzu Chi volunteers exercise this universal right by springing into action whenever they discover someone in need, while working through the existing welfare system and filling in gaps. Recipients of charity gradually became economically secure, and some Zulu women have also discovered that through being rich in love, they, too, could help others in difficult situations and experience the joy of giving. Although some went to work elsewhere in the area of manufacturing after completing their training, the majority stayed at their centre. Every skills training centre uses all its profits to sustain centre operations, to improve the quality of life of their communities, and to raise awareness about helping others in need.

Similar in nature to the skills training centres, the Blue Bank project is focused on teaching sewing skills; it has helped women near Ladysmith to become self-sufficient since 2004. With fabric and sewing machines and needles, women make clothing for sale. Although their consumers are limited to members of their own communities and their production volume is small (compared with that of mass-production textile companies), they manage to reinvest part of the income derived from the sale of their sewing to the Blue Bank project in order to assist in the purchase of materials for the sewing training centres.

A third key Tzu Chi project in South Africa, one that works to address the vital need of eliminating hunger in poverty-stricken areas, is the lunch programme for orphans. The lunch programme is a sustainable project which is mainly supported by the produce grown by each Zulu community throughout Durban. As of 2011, Tzu Chi Zulu volunteers in Durban have been providing lunch every day to more than 5,000 orphans. Encouraged by Tzu Chi South Africa, each Zulu community started to grow its own vegetables. Tzu Chi has also provided resources, farming skills and training on how to apply for farming land from the Government and cultivate vegetables in backyards. The harvested vegetables are often sufficient in respect of providing for families, communities and the lunch programme. Some also sell their produce in exchange for cash. If there is a poor harvest season, Zulu communities also raise funds to purchase vegetables or food from outside sources in support of the lunch programme. Indeed, the truly rich are those who are rich in love: we do not need to become financially wealthy before helping others.

These three programmes empower local communities, in particular Zulu women. More and more women have gained greater self-confidence, have taken responsibility for helping the sick and needy and have stood up on their own. Leaders from community churches, among others, have also become Tzu Chi volunteers in South Africa. Currently, in Durban, over 5,000 Zulu women have become regular volunteers.

The work of Tzu Chi reflects what its volunteers perceive to be advocated by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,[1] namely, inspiring and empowering people one by one until hearts of infinite love spring forth. Together, we can alleviate the suffering and turmoil in our society and eliminate disasters. No person can be neglected and no one should be underestimated.

While the confidence, skills and social status of Zulu volunteers have increased over the years, volunteers still keep Master Cheng Yen's teachings close to their hearts. A lifestyle that is simple and characterized by fewer desires, yet able to fulfil basic needs, serves to not only protect our environment, but slow the pace of global warming, thereby slowing the frequency and intensity of natural disasters caused by increased consumption of energy and other resources. The cries of the Earth, expressed through disasters, are a wake-up call to us — one that urges that we reflect mindfully and repent of those of our actions that have been driven by greed, anger and ignorance. Hence, Tzu Chi volunteers have not sought to become wealthy in terms of worldly goods. Instead, content with a simple life, they achieve fulfilment by sharing their love and the experience and wisdom gained by addressing poverty and hunger in their local communities.

In Tzu Chi, empowerment means the empowerment of love and compassion in each person's heart, expressed through helping others to the point where they themselves can stand on their own. When a person's love and compassion for all sentient beings begins to resonate, that person becomes empowered. Thus, those who are poor are in fact rich — rich in kindness and happiness. More Zulu women have become self-sufficient through practising their skills, inter alia, in agriculture, crafts and manufacturing; and others find joy in performing social work in their neighbourhood. A harmonious society and a world free of disasters can be created through the aggregation of many selfless hearts. These gentle forces continue to motivate volunteers in South Africa and the neighbouring countries of Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

[1] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.